

State of the City Address- 2020

Good Evening,

Tonight, I am pleased to reflect on the many accomplishments and actions taken by our Residents, City Staff and City Council to enrich the City of Freeport.

Each year, we strive to make our great city better and 2019 was no exception. Many of you worked together to make improvements from helping others in need to serving on volunteer boards and letting the City Council know your thoughts and ideas. It is our collective work that makes it possible for me to report that the state of our city is strong.

In the past year we have added 9 new businesses to our city and that opened 31 new jobs for the residents of Freeport. We were able to keep the millage rate at 4.7302 during the year of 2019-20 and adopted a budget of \$16,516,910 and have been able to stick with it due to careful planning. The growth to our community has increased over 1000 residents in this past year and continues to grow almost daily, currently we have a population of 8,277 people living in the city limits of Freeport. The City Council continues to work on their 5- year strategic plan ranking the projects they feel most important and achieving their goals completing them one by one. The City Council implemented a temporary position of Project Manager for the city and Charlie Simmons our current Parks and Recreation Director was asked to take on this job and report on his findings and status of each of the projects for the city and what a great job he has done in keeping the council and myself informed. This past year we have added a recognition award for our employees presenting Certificates of Appreciation to individuals who have been with the city for 5 years or more and thanking them for their service and dedication to the city, without their work and dedication we could not be moving forward as well as we are ,so many thanks to all of the employees of the city. This past year the city council has added a Lobbyist for the city "Liberty Partners "and they meet with our legislators in Tallahassee on behalf of the city and lobby for funding for our projects that we are working on. With the growth we are experiencing, the City Council has passed an new ordinance to change the charter to a city manager type government and they have been working on selecting the right person to take the helm of the city and continue to lead us into the future.

With the growth and development within the city the Planning Department has moved its location to the old community center building to have room to accommodate the needs of our city.

Our Billing Department has been working diligently to streamline the billing process for our customers making it easier for them to pay their bills, they have implemented a new reoccurring credit card payment option as a convenience to our customers and a new signed lease agreement for new accounts has been implemented requiring the owner of the property to approve the opening of the new account and we have opened 1368 new accounts these past twelve months. A new commercial rate study was done, and the new rates were implemented for Mobil Home and Trailer Parks as well as Commercial Businesses.

Our Water Department has been working around the clock to install new Sensus Meters throughout our system for a better and more accurate way of reading the customer usage in a fraction of time and antennas are being investigated to also help with the readings which eventually can be taken from the Billing Department Office.

Other improvements around the city is in our Sewer Department, which include the hiring of a new Class B Operator which has been very beneficial to the department. We said good-bye to a long-time employee of that department- Bridgett Hilgenberg, as she retired after 23 years of service to the city. We have been working on the improvements of the department to comply with DEP and their requirements and we have been able to obtain a screw press to help with the sludge removal from the system which was one of the major issues with DEP and all is working well and getting us in compliance. New design is underway for the improvements to the Sewer Plant upgrading to accommodate the increase in population and growth we are experiencing. The redesign of the plant is through a Loan/Grant from USDA and should be completed within the next two years.

Freeport has the privilege and pride in our parks and we are consistently working to improve each one of them, the Freeport Regional Sports Complex at Hammock Bay is the most used for different events and this year we have created a new pickle ball court on the existing tennis court and we have completed the new Recreational Trails which is designed for everyday users or handicapped residents, this grant was provided by FRDAP through DEP and the Grand Opening is being held this month on June 26th. In addition to this wonderful trail that has been installed we have also enhanced the park with a new pole barn which is used for extra storage and built a new concession stand near the multi-purpose fields. For our Marse Landing Park we have been awarded a grant by the Florida Boating Improvements to improve our boat landing features- many Thanks to the Parks Department for all their hard work on all of our parks. They are to be commended on all their efforts throughout.

New Christmas decorations were purchased for the city light poles throughout to enhance the holiday season and more will be added each year to help aid in the warmth of the holiday season.

Additional monuments were added to the Veteran's Memorial at Casey park this past year we find – Homecoming (representing children without a parent due to their serving in the military), War Dog- honoring the dogs used in combat, Pow honoring the Prisoners of War and Invisible Wounds Monument representing those suffering from PTSD and TBI.

Many projects are underway for the city with the help of our engineers, we are currently working on US 331 N. Utility improvement for sewer main installation and easements for 3 lift stations and a developers agreement for the 331 North Water & Sewer extension as well as East Bay Loop Watermain improvements, West Bayloop Lift Station improvements and Lafayette to East Jackson Force Main upgrade. The city has also been awarded a Beautification Grant for improvements along Highway 20 within the city limits of Freeport and we are moving forward with this grant to increase the beauty of our fair city. We were awarded a grant for the Bear Creek Project in the amount of \$850,000 to upgrade the bridge at Bear Creek but due to a discrepancy as to the ownership of this property being the county rather than the city the council voted to pass the grant along to the county so that they could do the necessary repairs to that area and the city would assist with providing \$75,000 towards the project. Funding has been awarded for the Safe Route to School Project with the design completed and construction to begin starting in 2023 installing sidewalks between the Elementary School and the High School located on Business Hwy 331 N.

The grant awarded to the city for the Barrier Free Park next door to city hall has been put into effect and the project has begun- it will be completed in phases with the first phase already in progress and progress reported as we move forward.

In an interlocal agreement for road maintenance with Walton County we have been working on the road repairs within the city and the resurfacing of Business 331 N.

Due to the recent pandemic of Covid -19 we have been very cautious for our employees as well as the public. The City Hall was closed to the public for approximately 2 months but has now opened back with taking cautionary measures for safety. Fortunately, we had new glass separations installed in the Billing Department and the Receptionist area before the epidemic began so that

helped tremendously for safety purposes, we have since added the glass separation in the new Planning Department as well.

A committee was formed and drawings and discussions have taken place on an addition to the Freeport City Complex, it is a 4 phase project to include a new 4,000 square foot Community Center, a Walton County Sheriffs sub-station, a new Library and more city government buildings as necessary. The city of Freeport recently bought the old American Legion property next to the Planning Department for use with the complex project.

Our work is far from done, but I am ever encouraged by the innovation and exciting things happening in Freeport every day. I am also proud of the hard work from our city employees and our city council and the warm friendly spirit that our city continues to demonstrate for visitors and residents alike. Thank you all for your contributions to our great city. I am looking forward to the next year ahead. In closing I would like to thank God for all his many blessings. God Bless the City of Freeport and God Bless America.

Russ Barley
Mayor